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Big Brother

He pushed his glasses back into place with one finger and laughed to himself, his keys jangling on their ring as he walked down the bare hallway. He could not help but laugh as he thought of all the conspiracy theories, the mad ramblings of limitless federal power. He took the keys and stood in front of the office door, looking one at a time for the correct key out of thirty seemingly identical ones. All those theories about government's power – if only they knew the truth. Struggling with his coffee and folder, he finally got the door open. After all, even without privacy and with unlimited information streaming in to waiting servers, even with everything they could possibly need at their fingertips...government was still government. Finally, the stubborn door gave way. It scraped the carpet as it opened inwardly, and he stepped into the dark.

"Hey, Bill. What's in the folder?"

He looked up and Pat apparently had not bothered to open the door for him.

"None of your business," he muttered under his breath before taking a sip of coffee, but it was already far too late. Pat had swiftly snatched the folder out from under his arm. Her deft, probing fingers had it open and exposed to the world in no time. If he were not embarrassed, his next thought would have remarked on how perfect this job was for her obsessively nosey nature. However, the folder had a personal effect...

"Still looking?" Pat held up the speed-dating flyer, and Bill grabbed it and stuffed it back in the folder. "Hey, I was just having fun. Besides, if you really want a date..." Though no one else was in the room, she looked side-to-side for other listeners, and Bill found himself leaning forward and listening in spite of himself. Secrets were attractive in that way, mysterious and worth hiding. She cupped her hand to her mouth and whispered, "Maureen." He snapped upright, practically bristling. She called it fun, but he considered it cruel and cold. Why interest someone and then slam the door in his face?

"What? Maureen's not so bad." Pat laughed, but was sincere.

Bill pointedly pushed his glasses back in place, "I am not in such desperate straits as that."

"Not yet!" Pat chuckled, but then added, "But, really, you are both very devoted—"

“Devoted, my good woman, is not nearly the right word for her. Obsessed, deeply obsessed and yet desiring a smaller government? No. Our very philosophies of life are far too different to mesh.”

“Exactly! Opposites attract. Besides which, she’s a Libra and you’re a Sagittarius, and the stars are—”

“No. Mind your own business.”

“Okay, okay! But at least note the irony of what you just said.”

Bill did note the irony. He looked up at the wall full of computer screens, of cameras in people’s homes, on the sidewalks, audio feeds from restrooms and elevators, thermal readings from hotels and office building. Yes, any fool could see the irony. There was no privacy, not from Pat, not from anyone.

The rest of the day went as usual: boring. All the information in the world was useless as just a jumbled mess, unsorted, unfiltered. A filter—yes, that was all he was. He and Pat had to somehow pick out important information from a constant stream of everyday lives. Even if they witnessed something minor, which was anything short of terrorist activity, all they could do was leave anonymous tips to the police or other agencies. It used to make him feel like a super-hero, but after awhile he lost hope as he watched ordinary people do cruel, ruthless acts. One can only witness so many murders before viewing anyone as a possible murderer. His trust in people was broken, and though he tried to fulfill himself and societal customs by searching for a bride, or at least good company, it was this desperate distrust which had earned him more than one refusal.

He rubbed his eyes and went out of the dark office, down the hallway to the break room, but paused in the doorway. Maureen was at the water cooler, saying that word she picked up from living in Japan before taking a sip. Ee-tah-dock-ee-moss? That is what it sounded like to him. She was beautiful, he could recognize that, but inwardly he groaned at seeing her. Why, of the few breaks she took, did she choose to come now? As if diving headfirst into a cold lake, he took a breath and entered.

“Good evening.” The way she said it made his skin crawl. It was too cultured and cheerful all at once. He realized now one reason why she rubbed him the wrong way: she was happy. She was not that overflowing, cheerleader kind of happy, but the peaceful ‘no one can perturb me’ kind of happy.

“Good evening,” he replied. He expected her to ask a question or continue the conversation further, but she just brushed her finger back and forth on the brim of her paper cup and smiled to herself. What could she possibly be smiling about? He wanted to ask, but instead blurted out, “What’s that word you say?”

“What word?”

“When you take a drink.”

“Oh, that. I didn’t realize I was still saying it. It’s *itadakimasu*. It means, I accept.”

“So, it’s like saying grace?”

“I guess you could say so. I’ve never thought of it that way, before.” Bill was just about to escape, but not soon enough, “Pat said you were having a social difficulty.” That was a strange way of putting it.

“So Pat is talking about my dates to you?”

“No, actually, she said you have stopped trusting people.”

Bill was sincerely surprised. He had never thought Pat to be very sensitive to what another person was feeling. She was always so brash and loud...now he knew he was desperate, because he was thinking about Pat.

“It’s alright, you know, not trusting people.” Surely, the day had worn far too much on him. She could not have said that, but he had to know for sure.

“What did you say?”

“It’s alright to not trust people.” Idealistic Maureen – no, this could not be coming out of her mouth. He just stood and stared for awhile, his mouth agape. She gave that little smile again and played with the brim of her cup, “Nevermind. I can see I’ve shocked you.” He kept standing there, even when she picked up her purse and was about to leave.

Finally, he said, “Don’t you trust anyone?”

“No,” she said quietly, almost sadly, “Not a soul.”

She paused in the doorway as she said it, and remained there for a moment. He could tell she was waiting to see if he had more to say, but nothing came out. He had so many questions, but if he tried to say one, he knew he would stumble over them all and only spill out mangled nonsense. Instead, he just watched her walk away quietly, back to work.

It seemed to be a chance encounter. Months went by without seeing even a glimpse of Maureen again. He could not even explain why her words had had such a profound effect. So what, if she did not trust anyone? He did not trust anyone, no one could in this job, after seeing everything. How was it she and Pat could remain cheerful? Pat was overly happy, and he had always assumed she clowned around to avoid feeling depressed, but Maureen seemed to be at peace, and yet, not trust. How was that possible? How could she reasonably reconcile not trusting anyone and not being afraid? After a few months, he finally decided to set the memory aside and say it did not matter. Maureen was Maureen and Pat was Pat, who cared about knowing more when he had so much information coming at him already.

“Well, you look gloomy.” He thought he had set it aside, but realized now he had been obsessing over it, again.

“Yeah, well, it’s just the job, I guess.”

“Avoidance!” Pat’s exclamation made him jump and he just gave her a confused look, “Maureen and I were talking about it. She was teaching me signs of lying and all sorts of things detectives do.”

“We already know all that.”

“Come on, Bill, we got it in training but it’s been forever since then! She keeps up-to-date on it, and helps me to, too.”

“You two talk?”

“Well, yeah, we take breaks at the same time.” Wait...

“She always takes her breaks at the same times?”

“Not always. On Mondays it varies because she gets worn out faster, but the rest of the week she sticks to a schedule.” He should have known. Of course she would stick to a schedule. Pat was talking again, though. “Why all of the interest in Maureen all of a sudden?”

“I just thought everyone said she only took two or three breaks, instead of the recommended six.”

“She does, but she’s figured out what times work best for her. Why? What were you thinking she based it on?”

“Just –whenever she gets tired.”

“She pushes herself really hard. I’ve told her she should take a vacation, but she just smiled and shrugged.”

“Yeah, I’ve never heard her say much.” Pat stared at him. “What? Do I have something in my teeth?”

“No, but...she’s a chatterbox around me. I never have to push and probe for information with her the same way I do with you. She’s open and honest. It’s kind of refreshing.” With the last sentence, Pat elbowed him and winked. Now Bill was in shock. Chatterbox? Open? Honest?

Bill started paying attention to when Pat went on break. He noticed she would be unusually quiet and just smile a lot after her one morning break, but after the other two she was back to her intensely joking self. So, he figured morning was the break she must share with Maureen. He did not want Pat to be around when he met. What was he doing? No, he had enough to deal with, he did not need a mystery, but, it was somewhat, well, fun. Instead of the information coming easily to him, he had to chase it, seek it out. It was something besides work to apply his mind to, something to look forward to. He laughed to himself as he walked down the hall to the break room, “Everyone has a hobby, I guess,” he thought aloud.

He heard it before he walked through the door, “*Itadakimasu.*” and smiled to himself.

He had guessed correctly. Maureen was traditional, and took a morning, afternoon, and evening break. He knew when the guys took their breaks, and Pat and Maureen were the

only girls in this particular office. Since the guys told him that they never ran into Maureen over the break, she must take her breaks at times to avoid everyone else's breaks. Thus: 2 pm and 6 pm. She looked surprised to see him come in. He realized he was smiling and tried to look more solemn. He did not want to make her suspicious, but it was obviously too late.

"What's so funny?" She laughed a little as she said it, curious about his private joke.

"What, you can smile secretly and I can't?"

"You've never asked."

"So you would just answer if I did?"

"Sure." This was not the sort of conversation he expected, but it reminded him of what Pat had said.

"Okay, then, why were you smiling and playing with your cup last time I saw you?"

She thought carefully for a long moment, "Oh, yes. That was when I remembered how cute my dog was that morning when she came to wake me up."

She had a dog? Never mind. That was not important. He decided to just ask what he really wanted to know directly, and see what happened, "How can you claim to not trust people and give Pat so much information?"

"Two reasons." Wait, she was actually going to tell him? He asked the question as a challenge, but did not expect a real response. "Firstly because if I seem to give her a great volume of information, I can get away with actually telling her very little useful information about myself, and meantime she will not probe around for it because it is given freely. Secondly, because it does not matter how much information I flood her with, if she is unable to use it then she is not a threat. As for not trusting anyone, I am able to evaluate whether or not someone is a threat to me." Translation: If Maureen can overwhelm Pat with frivolous information, then she will not be curious enough to dig for it, and just because people are capable of evil does not mean Maureen thinks she is the target.

"So, in other words, you know anyone is capable of the worst atrocity, but as long as they are not after you, you're safe."

"In other words, I might use strategies to keep my distance but everything I say is true and all but certain kinds of information are available. I can be a great friend without making myself vulnerable. As for how I can feel safe, even if I do not trust people...that is a religious matter and, unfortunately, talk of religion is forbidden here. It is sufficient to say that my Father protects me, and is worthy of my trust."

"But people are unworthy?"

"People are capable of the worst evil, and of the greatest good – but we are all fallible."

She seemed to have an answer for everything. Bill felt strangely dissatisfied, as though she was still hiding something, but, since she seemed so cooperative, it was hard to tell...

“Okay, then, answer me one more thing: How can you possibly do this job and at the same time advocate a smaller government?”

She smiled almost evilly, pausing only slightly before replying, “Tell me, Bill, do you think any of this does us any good? Sorting through useless information?”

“What?” Some of it had to be useful; otherwise he was wasting his time...

“It’s just like what I do with Pat. I give her a mountain of useless information, withholding what is valuable....I don’t look for what is valuable, because I know the company providing all the audio, video, and thermal feeds has already removed it. I look for what indicates what is missing. It’s like a math problem. We’re given everything except the part that will give us the answer, so we have to find that part before we can find the answer. Did you assume I do the same job as you?” She laughed a little, half to herself, “Oh, no, I’m afraid not. I’m not a filter, Bill. I’m here to fill in the blanks.” Then Idealist Maureen suddenly transformed with one smirking expression into....something frighteningly intelligent. Bill was not sure what exactly, but it appeared to be something evil.

“If the company is really doing that, removing information, why aren’t they prosecuted?”

“If we did, do you think they would release the information they’re withholding? Besides which, from what I can gather, they are not at the top of the pyramid. They are just one device of a bigger group, a device to make us more vulnerable....so you see, it is not contradictory at all. I want a smaller government, but the threats from within and without are such that they require the attention given them. They have to be addressed or the people will be harmed.”

“So you agree with a lack of privacy?”

“Certainly not, but now that we’ve gotten ourselves into this mess, we need to finish it. We need to know what information they are withholding because it is the only information necessary to our safety. Meantime, however, to keep up appearances, we have to pretend that we are grateful for the ‘services’ they provide, and appear to filter through the constant stream of useless information. I’m sorry if this revelation causes your role to become frustrating. None of it is really fair to you or your coworkers.”

“No, it’s already frustrating. We know it’s useless, and that we’re just filters, anyway.”

“I thought as much. The others said that you would all feel like guardians, doing something useful, but I knew from the beginning the long-term effects would be different...”

From the beginning? So she helped plan it all? How high up was she, exactly, and what was her role in all of this? “Why me? I mean, why tell me all of this?”

“Because even though your coworkers may have caught on somewhat, you are the one who has given up hope. You might see your position as useless right now, but the truth

is you are part of something much bigger than what you are asked to do. You, and everyone in this office, is essential to protecting this nation. I just want you to know that you still make a difference, even when you can't see it. I just...I don't want you to give up hope."

She began to walk out, but turned around to say one last thing, "You're not just a filter, Bill. Don't worry, I won't ask for you to keep this secret. We have ways of keeping it from reaching the company's ears."

"Who's 'we?'"

She tipped her head, smiled, and walked away without a reply.

"So I hear you're transferring, huh?" Pat was looking like a lost puppy and Bill was taken by surprise. Then, Maureen was suddenly in their office. She turned a switch and all the screens turned off.

"Yes, that's right. He's transferring to my section of the office," was all she said to Pat before picking up his things and walking out. Bill followed, a little dazed by the whole affair. Then Maureen broke his daze with a second shock, "She's a mole, by the way. That's why I take morning breaks with her. She's satisfied by trying to get close to me, and I feed her false information." Pat? A mole...was she really that deep?

Bill saw some stranger enter their office and shut the door.

"She's not going to—"

"It's her new partner. No, we wouldn't tip off her organization by trying to harm her. Besides, she would be considered a patriot in her country, and though that makes no difference to me, men follow certain rules of war out of respect for each other."

"Your rules?"

"Just one: survive and serve. Here we are."

"The janitor's closet?"

"It's an elevator. I know, it's a corny Bond type of thing, but oh well. Some people are just nostalgic."

"Why did you turn off the screens?"

"Flashing images make me feel sick. It's good old-fashioned paper and chalkboards from here on out, unless you want the screen."

"No, I'm good." So, Bill was going to get to do what Maureen did? Why, all of a sudden?

"Hey, Maureen." They were stepping off the elevator now, "I think I got everything, but do you think you could look it over?" The man was in casual clothing, just a t-shirt and Capri's. Maureen took what looked like a thick manuscript and went quickly from page to page, then handed it back, "3, 15, and 23. Recheck them."

"Yes, Ma'am."

A young woman dressed in casual clothing came up, and Bill noticed suddenly that no one was in business clothes. They were all in civvies, and no one wore a nameplate.

“Madame Vice –”

“Cherry, what did I tell you about addressing me formally?”

“Not to, but the President is here today and he is a, well, stickler.”

“Ah, I see, what did you need?”

“Well, I’m still kind of new at this, I just wondered if you could double-check my conclusions. I have the premises correct, I think...” Maureen took Cherry’s manuscript.

“The conclusions are shaky, but reasonable. I would look for more evidence.”

“Thank you, Ma’am.”

“No problem.”

Bill could not help it any longer, “You’re the Vice President? Of?”

“This department. Welcome to the place where we search for the valuable information by filling in the blanks. Here, you are going to draw conclusions based on information filtered upstairs. I told you what you did up there was important, but down here is where you get to ask all the questions. I’ve been watching you to see if you still wanted to chase the information, like you were scolded for in training.”

“You knew about that?”

“I look for important information, remember? So will you. You’ve seen people at their worst, but down here, Bill, you’ll see them at their best. Now go, save the world.” She handed him a binder with several untouched ‘manuscripts’ in it. Somehow he knew that this job would have a similar level of drudgery to it, and an equal lack of conspiratorial glamour but, looking around...he knew it would at least be valuable. Who knows, he might even just meet somebody...

“Hi, I’m Cherry, you’re new here, aren’t you?”

He smiled to himself. Yes, this job was already much more pleasant.

He pushed his glasses back into place with one finger and laughed to himself, his card bouncing on the end of its lanyard as he walked down the decorated hallway. He could not help but laugh as he thought of all the conspiracy theories, the mad ramblings of limitless federal power. He took his card and slid it through the reader, then entered the appropriate code. All those theories about government’s power – if only they knew the truth. Struggling with his stacks of manuscripts, he dashed through the door as soon as it opened so that it would not close on him this time. After all, even without privacy and with unlimited information streaming in to waiting servers, even with everything they could possibly need at their fingertips—government was still government. He stepped into the well-lit room and saw Cherry’s smiling face, and smiled back. Even with all that information streaming in, it

took people like him and Cherry to make sense of it all and protect the United States of America, land of the free, home of the brave.